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ABSTRACT

Characteristics, experiences, and aspirations of black graduate and professional students at six large and predominantly white state universities were surveyed in 1981. Attention was directed to grade point averages (GPAs), involvement in professional activities, program of study, educational and occupational histories, career choice, relations with peers and faculty, campus race relations, undergraduate experience, personal characteristics, and family background. Findings include the following: 50 percent had GPAs above 3.3 and 58 percent had GPAs above 3.0; 60 percent had not read a paper at professional meetings, 87 percent had not published a paper, and 84 percent had not been awarded research funding; 20 percent felt part of campus life (student activities); 60 percent were under 31 years old, and 25 percent were between 31 and 38 years old; 58 percent responded that professors sometimes involved black students in their research projects and nearly 25 percent said this never happened; 51 percent reported that white students sometimes avoided interacting with them socially, and 34 percent said that this happened often. It is concluded that faculty relations, social isolation, and supportive services may be influential in black student success. (SW)

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Preliminary Report: Winter 1981 Study of Black Graduate/Professional Students Attending Predominately White, State-Supported Universities

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INSTITUTE ON DESEGREGATION

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COOPERATIVE PROJECT

This paper has been identified by a joint project of The Institute on Desegregation at North Carolina Central University and ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education at George Washington University. The purposes of this project are to identify, collect, and make available literature concerned with

(1) the problems of minority students in higher education in general and
(2) the problems of desegregation in historically black colleges and universities in particular.

New published and unpublished materials are reviewed and recommended by participants of the Institute on Desegratation's Interinstitutional Research Group (ID/IRG) for acquisition by ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. An annual bibliography of this material will be published under the names of ERIC and the Institute.

Various types of materials are being solicited, especially unpublished and unindexed materials, as well as publications, produced by faculty and staff members. Included in these may be unpublished faculty studies, institutional research studies, master's theses, monographs, papers presented at professional meetings, articles from general and scholarly periodicals, and conference and workshop proceedings not covered by ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education.

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Introduction

Until recently, research on the educational problems faced by minorities in general, and Black Americans in particular, tended to focus on elementary and secondary schools. The tremendous increase in the numbers of Blacks attending predominantly white colleges and universities has forced researchers to pay more attention to the post-secondary experiences of Afro-Americans. Notable among these works is Morris' Elusive Equality: The Status of Black Americans in Higher Education (1979), Thomas' Black Students in Higher Education: Conditions and Experiences in the 1970's (1981), and Austin's Minorities in Higher Education (1982). The consensus among these and other similar pieces of research is that the problems of Black students on white campuses have increased along with their numbers. These problems, thought to be mainly ones of adjustment, are so severe that the gains due to increased rates of enrollment are offset by losses due to high rates of attrition.

Notwithstanding the noteworthy efforts mentioned above, there is still somewhat of a dearth of knowledge concerning the experiences of Black graduate and professional students attending predominantly white institutions. Researchers who have chronicled the rise and decline of Black enrollments in advanced study on white campuses attribute the rise to the Civil Rights Movement and the decline to worsened economic conditions and conservative political climate (Lehner, 1980; Blackwell, 1981). These factors are still in evidence, leading to the conclusion that the decrease in enrollments has continued a pace. But little data have been forthcoming to support this claim. This report is an attempt to remedy that deficit. It should also provide a more detailed picture of the current experiences of Black graduate and professional students enrolled at predominantly white universities across the United States. This information is crucial to giving educational and social change advocates guidance as to the appropriate polocies to alter, implement, or eliminate.

Research Problem and Methods

This study is concerned with Black graduate and professional students from six large majority white universities: University of Michigan; University of North Carolina Chapel Hill; University of California, Los Angeles; Memphis State University; State University of New York, Stony Brook; and Arizona State University. The data for this study are from a national mail survey of Black graduate and professional students enrolled during Winter 1981. A simple random sample, with interval selection, was used to select respondents. This yielded a response rate of 37%. The population sampled was represented by official Registrar lists of Black American students currently enrolled in graduate or professional school programs offered at each university. Since racial identification is a voluntary, self-determined process at each university, racial misclassification constitutes one source of sampling error.

Each subject was sent a questionnaire (with enclosed Business Return envelope) and two follow-up letters urging return of the questionnaires (after one and two weeks). The fifteen page questionnaire required approximately thirty minutes to complete and requested information on personal characteristics, family background, educational and occupational histories, future aspirations, program of study, relations with peers and faculty, campus race relations, educational experience, and academic performance. Since it is the intention of this report to be informative, the analysis in this paper will strictly depend on descriptive measures such as cumulative percentages and means. Those wishing to draw more concrete conclusions are advised to proceed with caution.

Keeping this in mind, it is time to discuss the areas of interest in our investigation. In the first area, adjustment, our interest will focus on how Black graduate and professional students are faring in their academic environments. Specifically this will concern factors such as: the relations of students with faculty and staff, as well as other students.

The second area, aspirations, concerns what level graduate and professional students wish to reach. Here the investigation will scrutinize items such as: degrees sought and occupations aspired to. Also, in studying this area we will look at parents' occupational level in comparison to their children's aspired occupational level. The final area of observation in this preliminary study will be achievement. Here we will examine factors such as graduate/professional grade point average (GPA), reception of research or teaching assistantships, and the number of papers presented or published. In essence, this report represents an attempt to obtain a sketch of the 350 Black graduate and professional students in our sample. After this preliminary report, we plan to produce additional reports that will look at these data on Black graduate/professional students in a more in-depth, critical, and systematic manner.

Student Educational Outcomes

It is logical to begin this examination of graduate and professional students by looking at grade point averages, involvement in professional opportunities (such as reading papers, publishing papers, etc.), aspired occupational, educational and success levels, and indicators of how much a part of campus life Black graduate and professional students feel. This is an appropriate starting point because the above factors represent our operationalization of Black graduate and professional student achievement, aspirations, and adjustment.

With this in mind, let us begin with student achievement. Fifty percent of Black graduate and professional students have GPAs above 3.3 and 58% are above 3.0. It is generally believed that people who achieve at this level are making satisfactory progress toward a degree. However, when we look at professional opportunities, 60% of these students have not read a paper at professional meetings, 87% have not published a paper, and 84% have not been awarded research funding. The evidence displayed above reveals somewhat of a contradiction. These B black students do well in classes meant as preparation for professional opportunities,

but do not (in sizeable numbers) engage in related activities essential for well-rounded professional development (e.g., publication, participation in professional meetings, etc.) and competition on today's market. As this report progresses we hope to probe why this is the case.

As might be expected, Black graduate and professional students' career aspirations are by conventional standards quite high. For instance, 58% expected to assume prestigious jobs, comparable in status to bank officers and financial managers, engineers, physicians and lawyers. Along the same lines it is plainly evident that these students will not settle for simply gaining such jobs. Fifty-three per cent claim they will not be content with their work unless recognized as one of the top people in their chosen occupation. Apparently there is no lack of motivation to achieve and excell among the Black graduate and professional students in this sample.

As regards social adjustment, we found that only 20% of Black graduate/professional students felt themselves to be a part of campus life as far as student activities were concerned. When asked about the extent that extracurricular activities reflected their interests, of this sample 59% responded either not at all (17%) or very little (42%). The overwhelming skew of the data suggests poor social involvement in the campus by these Black graduate and professional students at majority white institutions. They seem not to be thoroughly integrated into the social life of their respective schools.

Having looked at the three outcomes of student achievement, aspirations and adjustment, we look now at factors thought to influence these three outcomes. Here we examine connections between student outcomes (discussed above) and three areas of their lives: personal background factors, undergraduate experiences, and current campus experiences.

Personal Background Factors

The age composition of our sample of Black graduate and professional students is variable. Sixty per cent are under 31, and 25% are between 31 and 38. Although the majority of students in this sample are younger, there are significant numbers who are older. Other interesting factors to consider are the students' family of origin, family structures and education levels. Here we see that 73% grew up with both natural parents in the home. Of interest also is that thirty-two per cent of these students siblings with educational attainments to the Master's degree level or higher. Looking at their parents, we find that 35% of fathers and 43% of mothers were high school graduates. Eighteen percent of fathers and 10 per cent of mothers had earned college degrees. As one can see these Black graduate and professional students come from families with strong traditions of educational achievement (relative to the general Black American population). Without doubt these traditions were of some influence in shaping their higher than mean aspirations and achievement.

Another area which we must look at is the occupational attainments of the parents of students in this sample. The occupational levels characteristic for most mothers were comparable in prestige to jobs such as: machine operators in factories, practical nurses and hairdressers. For fathers characteristic occupational prestige levels tended to be higher on average, including such jobs as machine operators in factories, machinist and brick masons. The mean annual income for Black graduate and professional students' parents was $23,200. Twenty-one percent of the students reported parental earnings of over $40,000 per year. These students expect to be upwardly mobile, compared to their parents. They plan on higher status jobs and higher earnings. Evidence is that Black graduate and professional students receive much encouragement of their upwardly mobile orientations from their family; for instance, the largest category who influenced them to apply to and enter their current university was family members (34.5%).

A final area of importance in the arena of personal background is the family situation of Black graduate and professional students themselves. Fifty-eight percent of them are single, another thirty-one percent are married, and eleven percent are separated or divorced, representing a sizable forty-two percent with possible family commitments, of these, thirty-four percent have children. Such family commitments certainly have implications for these students' academic careers.

In sum, a look at the patterns which exist in our graduate and professional student data show several items of importance. The solidarity and educational level of the Black graduate and professional students' family can clearly be seen. A majority of the sample comes from homes where both natural parents were present and where educational attainment levels were relatively high. It should be kept in mind that their parents' high educational levels (relative to most Blacks) translated into primarily working class jobs and annual incomes. Although most of the students are single, there is a sizable minority who are either married, separated, or divorced, and who also have children. It would seem that these Black graduate and professional students receive strong family support and were provided with positive role models. A potential source of hindrance to success in graduate/professional school are the family commitments which a sizable minority are expected to fulfill (such as supporting a spouse and/or children).

Undergraduate Career Experiences

If we were to predict the graduate experience from the undergraduate experience, we would expect this sample to be fairly high achievers: forty-nine percent had undergrad GPAs over 3.0. We would also expect few adjustment problems related to the large size and predominantly white environments of state-supported universities, since forty-two percent attended schools having a student body of at least 10,000 and slightly over one-half attended undergraduate institutions that were majority white. Yet, few students claim outstanding academic (grades) and professional (paper presentations, publications, etc.) achievements. One cannot help but wonder

about the source(s) of this disparity.

Current Campus Experiences

Perhaps the missing piece to this puzzle can be found in thse Black students' relations with their professors, since faculty distribute teaching and research assistantships, as well as provide the impetus for paper presentations and publications. We find that fifty-eight percent of the respondents believe professors sometimes involve Black students in their research projects and activities and nearly one-quarter said this never happens. Fifty-seven percent responded that professors sometimes assist Black students in exploring job possibilities, while 25% responded that they never do so. Similarly with teaching assistantships, forty-five percent felt professors sometimes offered Black students opportunities to gain experience as TAs or instructors, yet just over a third believed this was never the case. The majority of students (61%) believed their professors sometimes had difficulty relating to Black students, and nearly a half said their professors sometimes avoided Black student interaction outside the classroom. It is not surprising, then, that although seventy-one percent characterized their own relations with white faculty as good, only fifty-three percent characterize overall Black student relations with white faculty that way. Forty-two percent said these relations were poor.

Thus there seems to be some discomfort on the parts of white faculty at dealing with their Black students. This discomfort gets translated into an apparent reluctance to work with Black students, as well as into subtle discriminatory acts directed towards Black students. Two examples of such acts reported by students were: "Several professors expressed surprise, disbelief regarding my writing ability ("you really write well." Did you write this, it's so articulate."); "Teacher who was always too busy to help me or answer questions about the classwork, yet found time for white students." Black faculty might be of some assistance in this area since they should not only experience less discomfort, but are also in a position to educate their colleagues. But over half of the sample reported little

or no exposure to Black professors. Few Black students can increase their professional experiences by working with Black professors. Instead, they must rely overwhelmingly on relationships with white faculty. Apparently these relations are in need of improvement.

Relations with white students, whose role is less pivotal in determining black student success, are also less problematic. Most of the sample (61%) felt that white students sometimes showed high regard for Black student academic abilities, and sometimes seemed eager to assist Black students and share information (58%). Nearly 3/4 (70%) characterized their own relations with white students as good, while close to 2/3 (63%) characterized overall Black student relations with white students as good.

Social interaction with white peers is more problematic, however. Black graduate/professional students felt that white students avoided them outside of academics: fifty-one percent reported that white students sometimes avoided interacting with them socially, and 34% said that this happened often. Over 3/4 of the sample (77%) reported some interaction with Blacks in their own programs, but over half (57%) also reported little interaction with Blacks outside their departments or schools. Although 78% do not agree that Black men and women students don't get along very well, fifty-six percent do not believe that there is unity and sharing among Blacks at their school. The size of the Black student populations at these schools could be a factor here since over eighty percent of the sample stated there were not enough Blacks in either their programs or at their universities. Sixty-two percent of students belong to some type of club or organization, perhaps to combat this isolation. These clubs/organizations seem to be of the sororal/fraternal type (Delta Sigma Theta, Alpha Phi Alpha), minority departmental (Black Graduate Students in Management, School of Public Health Minority Student Caucus), and other professional organizations (Michigan Association Gerontology Students, American Planning Association). Nevertheless, these clubs/organizations do not compensate totally for the isolation: seventy-seven percent of the students said they hardly felt a part of general campus life, and 59% said that extracurricular activities hardly reflected their interests.

Another part of the campus experience related to adjustment is supportive services; financial aid is a major part of such services. Less than ten percent reported fellowships as their major source of funding, and only two percent reported assistantships (e.g., research or teaching). Personal savings and loans rank first and second as major sources of funding. Thirty-seven percent of the sample receive no financial aid at all. It seems that financial worries or limitations would be important factors in explaining barriers to Black student admission, enrollment, and retention in graduate/professional school. Yet, only eighteen percent of students reported finances as the largest barrier to admission, and only six percent said it was the most serious problem Black students face. Although close to a half said their funding was adequate (46%), over a third (36%) said financial problems could prevent them from attaining their educational goals. Hence, finances are a major albeit not the most pressing concern.

Other services seem to be more problematic. Nearly one quarter (24%) of the sample did not find tutorial and remedial services helpful, and twenty-one percent did not find them available. Although forty-four percent were satisfied with their academic advising, a sizable thirty-seven percent were dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction is even more apparent in their suggestions for new programs to be implemented by the Dean or Chancellor of their universities as aids to Black students. The second most frequent request was for improved academic advising, counseling, and tutorial programs. At the same time, relations with staff were satisfactory. Most students reported staff as having some difficulty relating to Black students (60%); sometimes being concerned with the welfare of Black students (62%); and sometimes treating Black students fairly and with respect (61%). Seventy-one percent stated their own relations with staff were good, and sixty-three percent stated that overall Black student relations with staff were good.

In their racial attitudes, this sample tended to blame the system rather than themselves as an explanation for why Blacks do not get ahead. They also tended to see whites as conservative in their racial attitudes

(85%) and advocated group pressure and social action as a means of overcoming discrimination (66%). On a more individual level, over half felt that professors, college teachers, friends, and neighbors would all give them high personal evaluations. They gave themselves high evaluations on self-confidence (76%) and leadership abilities (82%). This highly self-confident attitude may explain why only about a 1/3 (34%) considered dropping out of school, despite financial worries, problematic relations with faculty and feelings of social isolation. A desire to prove how capable they are is revealed through these students' responses to questions about factors which keep them from dropping out: "I don't want them to think they have won, and that I am not able to keep up with the white students. "; (To) "Prove to a white University that blacks can compete and make it."

Summary and Future Research Directions

In summary, these data lead us to expect that three general areas of concern will stand out in the determination of Black student success in graduate/professional school: faculty relations, social isolation, and supportive services. Perhaps the most important of these are faculty relations. Poor relations with faculty are likely to result in decreased opportunities for teaching and research, denial of essential mentoring relationships, lower grades, and less likelihood of introduction into professional networks. Any one of these lacks detracts greatly from the advanced degree educational process. Since graduate school imposes a heavy workload, the maintenance of satisfactory progress towards the degree places limitations on time available for social interaction, particularly across departments. As a result, Black graduate/professional students often pay an academic price for their efforts to build and maintain social networks essential to their social-psychological well-being. Feelings of isolation are heightened by the limited numbers of Black students and faculty around. Inadequate supportive services could leave students habitually plagued by problems with lacks in available funding and tutorial services. Together, problems of poor faculty relations, extreme social isolation, and unsatisfactory supportive services culminate in the unusually high attrition

rates currently observed among Black students in advanced degree programs.

The interrelatedness of these three themes points to one overall issue: the need for increased, specially targeted assistance. Black graduate/professional students require more support socially, financially, academically, and professionally from the schools of which they are part. They are a special population with special needs. Asked to identify the most serious problems faced by Blacks in their program, these students pointed to a variety of factors: "social acceptance"; "lack of close relationships"; "upon completion finding employment-networking is essential and blacks do not have sufficient ties to proper networking." Asked to recommend new programs or policies the chancellor or president might adopt to aid Black students, they replied: "development of support groups among graduate students"; "an ombudsman"; "day care center so that students can attend classes without worrying about their children."

This preliminary report does not pretend to offer definitive interpretations of our data. Further, more detailed analyses will be required to accomplish this. It does, however, sketch the broad contours of our data. By so doing, it targets important areas for future, more detailed study. Black graduate/professional student relations with program faculty is one such important area for future study. So much of graduate/professional training relies on contacts with faculty which are both extensive and intensive. Poor faculty relations are, therefore, potentially devastating in their consequences for Black student career development. Another area of concern is sex differences: Black women tend to concentrate in certain programs and to have lower grades in graduate/professional school. We need to look at the dynamics of sex and race discrimination as experienced by them. Involvement in supportive networks (academic and social) is an essential ingredient of success in graduate/professional programs. We need, therefore, to examine the support systems successful Black students are able to fashion for themselves from informal and formal mechanisms in their school environments. Given that schooling is a two-stage phenomenon which assumes: 1) adequately prepared and motivated students and 2) supportive, stimulating, instructive environments, we must not only look at the

universities in question, but also at the students themselves. What are personal attributes which determine student rates of attrition?

The thrust of future research on these data will be two-fold. On the one hand, we will seek to contribute to the growth of knowledge about how the higher education process is structured, using Black Americans as illustrating cases. On the other hand, we will attempt to formulate data based recommendations aimed at achieving changes in policies and practices shown to be detrimental to Black student retention.

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